

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Morton Subotnick's *Making Music* by Morton Subotnick

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Morton Subotnick's Making Music

Voyager CD-ROM for Macintosh and Windows, Voyager Company, 576 Broadway, Suite 406, New York, New York 10012, USA; telephone toll-free in the USA (800) 446-2001, or (212) 431-5199; <http://www.voyagerco.com>; about US\$ 40

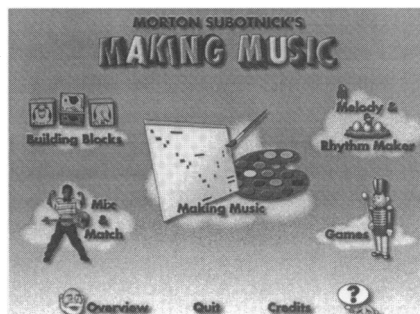
*Reviewed by Ralph Ames
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Morton Subotnick's Making Music (hereafter *MS's MM*) is a new CD-ROM from the Voyager company, advertised as "the first real (and totally cool) composing space for kids." Realized by the noted electronic music composer Morton Subotnick, programmed by Mark Coniglio, and produced by Jane Wheeler, the program teaches 5- to 10-year-old children the basics of music composition in an intuitive way. Unlike educational titles that simply impart information, *MS's MM* is a creative tool.

The CD-ROM contains both Windows and Macintosh versions. I tested the Macintosh version, using the QuickTime Musical Instruments extension, which provides software sound samples according to the General MIDI standard. Although no external synthesizer is required, the timbral quality of these samples is not high. Conveniently, the program also works with an external MIDI synthesizer if better sound quality is desired.

The basic premise of *MS's MM* is that the rudiments of Occidental music composition, namely, melody, rhythm, and phrase structure, can be taught before a child learns to master a musical instrument and the intricacies of music notation.

The program is divided into five ac-



tivities: Building Blocks, Melody and Rhythm Maker, Games, Mix and Match, and Making Music. Since there is almost no text in the interface and no manual (only installation notes), the audio help is essential to learning each activity. Fortunately I learned quickly how to navigate in most of the activities. As an additional aide, QuickTime video presentations walk the user through the entire process of composing.

Building Blocks lets one play with six tunes, each broken down into three sections represented by blocks on the screen. Children can rearrange a tune or revise both its melody and rhythm. Then they can blend their attempts with the originals to create new compositions.

In the Melody and Rhythm Maker, birds on telephone wires (quasi-staves) create melody and hatching chicks define rhythm. After you separately create melody and rhythm, a click of the mouse puts the notes and rhythm together. The mapping of melody to rhythm is already quite abstract, reminiscent of serial composition technique. I would be surprised if five-year olds understand how all this works.

Three games limber up the ear muscles. Same or Different plays two tunes and asks whether they are identical. Name That Difference plays two tunes and asks if the second one is the same, higher, lower, faster, slower, backwards, or upside down. Find the Same plays a tune and asks

the child to figure out which one of three or four variants it matches.

Mix and Match uses a flip-book metaphor: a child can combine different melodies, rhythms, and instruments.

The program's centerpiece is the Making Music window, which presents a graphical piano-roll sequencer interface (see Figure 1). Pitches are quantized to one of six scales: major, minor, pentatonic, whole tone, chromatic, and user-defined in equal temperament. (Sorry kiddies, no micro-tones!) As in a piano roll, line length represents duration, thickness represents loudness, vertical position represents pitch, and color represents instrumentation. To the left of the piano-roll window is a palette of icon tools for voice selection, melodic inversion, retrograde, time shrinking, time expansion, and tempo change. Mr. Subotnick appears in the form of a cartoon character in the icons. For less than US\$ 40, a fair amount of sequencing power is made available here. It makes one reflect on the outrageous prices of commercial music software.

For all its daring modernity of means, a limitation of this program is its reliance on a traditional conservatory approach, defining music as a closed set of pitches and rhythms played by imitation acoustic instruments (i.e., MIDI music). Kids (and even some adults) are open to a much broader concept of musical sound. But *MS's MM* is easy, fun, and inexpensive. What more could a parent want?

Recordings

Salvatore Martirano: *Retrospective 1962-1992*

CD CRC 2266, Centaur Records,
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